Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary 1944-1945

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REMEMBERING RAPE: DIVIDED SOCIAL MEMORY AND THE RED ARMY IN HUNGARY 1944–1945*

During the Soviet occupation of Budapest at the end of the Second World War, it is estimated that around fifty thousand women in Budapest were raped by soldiers from the Red Army.[1] After Berlin, the women of Budapest suffered in greater numbers than those of any other Central or Eastern European capital. This was partly because it was defended, was subjected to a drawn-out siege, and the civilian population was not evacuated. Moreover, Hungary's alliance with the Axis powers meant that the besieging Soviet army saw Budapest as enemy territory and its women as more legitimate targets than those in regions perceived to be sympathetic to the Allied cause.[2] During these months, for the majority of the inhabitants of the city, rape was a common occurrence that might be suffered by family, friends, acquaintances or neighbours.

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[1] Due to the social silence that surrounded the issue in 1945, and the destruction of written materials under the Communist regime, an exact figure for the number of women raped in Budapest is unlikely to emerge. Ungváry put the figure at 10 per cent of the female population of Budapest (approximately fifty thousand women). See Krisztián Ungváry, *The Battle for Budapest: 100 Days in World War II*, trans. Ladislaus Löb (London, 2002), 289. The present article focuses almost exclusively on male on female rape. Some conservative writers have used stories of female Red Army soldiers raping Hungarian men for propagandistic purposes, although I have found no evidence of this occurring. I have not discovered any evidence of homosexual rape, and for this reason the article does not address the issue.

[2] After the war, the Soviet regime awarded two sets of medals: those for cities 'liberated', and others for cities 'conquered'. Soldiers who fought during the siege of Budapest were categorized as 'conquerors'. See Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941–1953* (Oxford, 2005), 63.

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Modern Western representations of the Red Army have been dominated by stories about brutal rapists. Populist historical accounts of the behaviour of the Red Army in Central Europe, such as Antony Beevor's *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945*, have presented Soviet troops as drunken, out of control and sexually repressed. The principal interaction they are seen to have had with local populations is one of brutal, indiscriminate violence.[3] Feminist scholarship on rape, which has enlarged our understanding of the role of sexual violence in war, has also contributed to this type of representation.[4] Since the collapse of Communism, stories about the cruelty of the Red Army have become widespread in public discourse in Hungary too.

Yet rape has not always played a central role in histories of the Red Army's behaviour in Eastern Europe. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, faced with their own soldiers' fraternization, use of prostitutes and rape, the Allied powers did not draw attention to Red Army atrocities.[5] Rather, accounts of mass rape available in the West were first published by Eastern European leaders who had been forced into exile because of their opposition to Communism.[6] Within the Soviet Union, perpetrators of the atrocities defended their actions. Boris Slutsky, the Russian poet who travelled with the Red Army through Eastern Europe, suggested in his memoir *Things*

[3] See Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945* (London, 2002), 28–32. He reinforced the idea of the extreme brutality of the Soviets by reference to the rape of Polish and Jewish women who were not representatives of an enemy nation. This concept of arbitrary victimization was crucial in the promotion of the book to a British audience. See, for example, Antony Beevor, 'They Raped Every German Female from 18 to 80', *Guardian*, 1 May 2002.

[4] The victimization of women in modern warfare was first explored in detail by Susan Brownmiller, *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London, 1975). For an example from the war in Bosnia, see Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Post-Modern Genocide: Rape and Pornography', in Alexandra Stiglmayer (ed.), *Mass Rape: The War against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Lincoln, Neb., 1994). This was the first article to bring the mass rapes in Bosnia to a wide audience. It tried to establish links between the everyday use of pornography, the normalization of sexual brutality and the victimization of women in wartime.

[5] For this point, see Atina Grossman, 'Trauma, Memory and Motherhood: German and Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-Nazi Germany, 1945–1949', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, xxxviii (1998), 225. For details of American fraternization, see John Willoughby, 'The Sexual Behaviour of American GIs during the Early Years of the Occupation of Germany', *Jl Military Hist.*, lxii (1998).

[6] For the Hungarian case, see Ferenc Nagy, *The Struggle behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. Stephen K. Swift (New York, 1948), 63.

That Happened that Hungarian women had enjoyed being raped:

> Hungarian women loved the Russians in their turn, and along with the dark fear that parted the knees of matrons and mothers of families, there was also the affectionate nature of young women and the desperate tenderness of the women soldiers, who gave themselves to the men who had killed their husbands.[7]

Despite the demise of the Soviet Union, ex-Soviet citizens' persisting pride in the Red Army for defeating Fascism has meant that such war crimes have continued to be denied. One documentary film-maker found that many ex-Red Army soldiers still refused to accept that rapes had occurred at all, admitted only to consensual sexual relations or claimed that Eastern European women deliberately used sex to spread diseases in order to weaken the fighting capabilities of the Red Army.[8]

This article focuses on the particularly striking finding that within the Hungarian civilian population that experienced Red Army occupation both types of story were told; denials that rape occurred have existed alongside descriptions of the brutal behaviour of Soviet soldiers. Accounts taken from the Fascist period, from the Soviet occupation itself and from the Communist and post-Communist periods are used to explore the diverse range of experiences of, and meanings attached to, mass rape committed by the Soviets in Hungary. It analyses how the issue of rape became politicized in 1944 itself, and in remaining so, has forged deeply divided interpretations of what occurred amongst different groups within the Hungarian population. It examines how the experience of three different political systems — Fascist, Communist and post-Communist — has shaped the ways in which Hungarians have interpreted and found meaning in the national experience of atrocities. The aim is not to uncover the realities of rape at the end of the war, but rather to reveal the political resonances behind the conflicting ways in which rape stories have been told, and to address the political importance of these narratives about the Red Army in Hungarian society since 1944.

[7] Boris Slutsky, *Things That Happened*, ed. and trans. G. S. Smith (Moscow, 1999), 148.

[8] *BeFreier und Befreite: Krieg, Vergewaltigungen, Kinder*, dir. Helke Sander (Bremer Institut Film, Germany, 1992).

The evidence is taken in part from diaries and political commentaries about the atrocities of 1944/5, but is primarily drawn from an oral history project in which I interviewed seventy-six men and women from the Budapest middle class, born between 1907 and 1938, about their experiences of the Second World War and the early Communist state.[9] Rape was initially not an issue I intended to explore. Without much prompting, however, most respondents provided detailed, and extremely varied, representations of their experience of atrocities.[10] Some Hungarians presented rape as one of the defining horrors of the Second World War. Others did not see the Red Army as sexual aggressors. Some maintained that rape was of little significance or was not so widespread as to affect their behaviour under Soviet occupation. Some suggested they were not even aware it was happening. Some denied to themselves for many years that rapes had occurred. Others suggested that where it did happen, it was just as frequently consensual sex between a soldier and a Hungarian woman. Some turned the common understanding of rape as an act of power over women on its head: in their accounts the Red Army rapist became the true victim of the encounter. Their testimony demonstrated just how politicized the issue of mass rape had become in Hungarian society: all stories, even by women who were raped themselves, were shaped by political conflicts over the Hungarian past.

[9] This material was collected as part of a wider project that examined the attitudes and experiences of the Budapest middle class under the early Communist state in Hungary and explored such issues as social mobility, resistance and the formation of new social identities after 1948.

[10] The interviews were conducted between 1998 and 2000. Each averaged around three hours in length. There were thirty-one female and forty-five male respondents. All respondents were promised anonymity: hence all names are pseudonyms. As a man interviewing about rape, I found that by showing appropriate sensitivity, it was possible to obtain detailed testimony. During some interviews women stressed that it was important that as a man I should understand 'women's experiences'. Moreover, my main focus was on collective understandings about rape rather than amassing detailed information about what happened to individual women. Any reluctance of raped women to talk about their experiences to a man was therefore not crucial to this particular project. In addition, I was equally interested in how men see the issue of rape; and in an interview situation, men might have found it much more difficult to talk to a woman interviewer about this sensitive subject.

I

RAPE STORIES: VICTIMIZATION AND TRAUMA

James: So, can you tell me more about your experiences of Soviet troops?

Erzsébet: Frightening, definitely, for a few months. My father was already in the capital and my mother and four children stayed in Komárom.[11] I well remember mother dressing me as an old lady, just to make sure that no one would attempt . . . to take advantage of me, although I was only nine years old. But with good reason, because my best friend, her mother didn't do it, and the child was grabbed and when she didn't let her go, they shot her in her mother's arms, because the Soviet army officer took a fancy to her . . . So these are dramatic experiences and very dramatic memories.

Stories such as Erzsébet's were typical of the post-Communist representation of the Red Army in Hungary.[12] In these accounts, Red Army soldiers would molest any type of woman, no matter what her status, age, condition or appeal: hence even a nine-year-old girl would have had to protect herself. This obligation to narrate stories which characterized Red Army violence as unavoidable meant that where women were not violated, they were compelled to tell stories in which they were almost raped but escaped through unusual circumstances, ingenious strategies or just luck:

Márta: There were three of us who were fourteen and fifteen years old. We were dug into the coal in the cellar, so that only our noses stuck out. Moreover, we were doing this for a week, when the procession of Russians came in every night. My mother and the mother of the other small girls smeared our faces with coal, and let their hair down to make themselves look like old women. And then they sat on us, to hide us.

Yet in showing that rape could be avoided, such stories detracted from the theme of inevitable violence. Stories of escape were therefore frequently juxtaposed both with reiterations that rape

[11] A medium-sized town to the north-west of Budapest on the present-day Slovak–Hungarian border.

[12] Post–Communist conservative histories have emphasized the role of Hungarians as victims of the Red Army: see, for example, Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, 285–95. Although he admitted that the civilian experience of the Red Army was varied, he only addressed the question of atrocities committed on the local population. Feminist-influenced histories have been concerned with uncovering the true number of female victims of the Red Army: see Andrea Pető, 'Átvonuló hadsereg, maradandó trauma: az 1945-ös budapesti nemi erőszak esetek emlékezete' [Passing Army, Lasting Trauma: The Memory of Rape Cases in Budapest in 1945], *Történelmi szemle*, xli (1999), 85–7.

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was unavoidable and with further accounts of those for whom similar strategies failed:

> Magda: There was a well-known thing that everybody painted themselves black,[13] and dressed up in all sorts of headscarves . . . to appear much older than they were. But, I should say, this didn't affect them, because we heard that this [i.e. rape] happened to sixty- or seventy-year-old women also, if the mood took them, because they were drinking together and they didn't know what they were doing.

These respondents' underlying claim was that all Hungarian women were victims regardless of whether they had been violated. Rape was an endemic, everyday threat from which nobody was exempt. Many historians have seen the outpouring of these narratives as the authentic and objective recollection of events previously repressed.[14] Decades after the event, Hungarian women have finally been able to 'come to terms' with the shame they felt at having been raped and are now able to speak about it. The best-known post-Communist account of rape, Alaine Polcz's wartime memoir *Asszony a fronton* (Woman at the Front), was promoted as the tale of a traumatized victim of rape who had overcome tragedy, found happiness and could now tell her story.[15] In addition, these accounts have been presented as post-Communist 'truth-telling': women, freed from public censorship, were now able to relate their brutal experiences at the hands of the Red Army.

It is certainly the case that the collapse of Communism has afforded both women and men the first opportunities to talk openly about rape. Immediately after the war, Hungarians could not publicly articulate accounts of their experiences at

[13] Similar techniques were used by women during the Japanese army's 'rape of Nanking' in 1938, and in Berlin in 1945 under Red Army occupation: see Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (London, 1997), 96; Atina Grossman, 'A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers', in Robert G. Moeller (ed.), *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor, 1997), 43–4.

[14] Testimony from raped women has often been used quite uncritically to illustrate the horrors of occupation, with little analysis of the complex reasons behind the choice that some women make to relate their suffering publicly. For a fascinating exploration of the ways in which the 'emotional power of individual victims' voices' taken from the Soviet occupation were manipulated by historians in the German Federal Republic, see Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, 2001), 54–5.

[15] The English version is Alaine Polcz, *A Wartime Memoir: Hungary, 1944–1945*, ed. and trans. Albert Tezla (Budapest, 1998): see editor's 'Introduction', 20.

the hands of the Red Army.[16] At a political level, even before the Communist takeover in 1948, there was no free discussion of these atrocities. No public commission was set up to collect women's stories, as there has been after other conflicts.[17] By early 1945, the press in Hungary was controlled by the Soviet-dominated Allied Control Commission, which did not allow stories of atrocities to be printed. At a social level too, there was very little discussion of rape: unlike in other cities which suffered, such as Berlin, women did not take pride in recounting publicly the stories of what had happened to them, nor did they keep records of their experiences.[18] Fearing being stigmatized, many rape victims chose to hide their suffering for many years.[19] The Communist regime maintained a public silence over the issue for more than four decades: stories of mass rape were not compatible with the state-sponsored image of the Red Army as liberators of Hungary from Fascism.

Whilst the end of Communist censorship has allowed the issue of rape to be aired, the historian must examine the political forces which have pushed *victim stories* into public prominence, rather than simply explaining them as post-Communist 'truth-telling'. The popularity of such stories has not been the result of a post-Communist feminist movement; in fact, feminism has been a very weak force, stigmatized by its association with women's 'emancipation' under the Communist state in the 1950s and the perceived decline in Hungarian family values it

[16] It is reported that after 1945 at the Faculty of Law in Budapest a notice stated, 'No dissertation will be considered on the law of rape and on the doctrine of the Holy Crown': László Péter, 'The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible', *Slavonic and East European Rev.*, lxxxi (2003), 422.

[17] See, for example, Ruth Harris, 'The "Child of the Barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism during the First World War', *Past and Present*, no. 141 (Nov. 1993), 206. In France, following the First World War, women were seen as embodiments of a 'violated, innocent female nation'. Their stories were therefore taken seriously and collected. After the Second World War, women were presented not as victims but as 'horizontal collaborators', and were therefore stigmatized.

[18] On the social silence that surrounded rape in Budapest immediately after the war, see Andrea Pető, 'Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna in 1945', in Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (eds.), *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003), 132. On the contrasting preparedness of women in Berlin to retell rape stories both privately and publicly with a 'certain bravado and "Berliner Schnauze" [sarcastic humour]', see Grossman, 'Question of Silence', 43.

[19] See, for example, Polcz, *Wartime Memoir*, ed. Tezla, 9 (editor's 'Introduction').

engendered.[20] Rather, victim stories have been shaped mainly by the agendas of Hungarian nationalism. Indeed, it was only those women who came from nationalist, conservative and strongly anti-Communist backgrounds who constructed their stories of rape in this way. Nationalists have seen that such stories of violation bolster their versions of Hungary's Fascist and Communist past and have thus sought to bring them into the public domain. Narratives of victimization under Red Army occupation have been employed to underline and foreshadow the suffering of the Hungarian people under the later Communist regime. Moreover, stories of Soviet atrocities, including rape, have been used to divert attention away from Hungary's experience of, and involvement in, Fascism and the Holocaust.

Nationalists' use of brutal rape stories to illustrate the idea of the subdued, occupied and victimized nation began as early as the Communist takeover itself. Ferenc Nagy, leader of the Smallholders' party and Hungarian prime minister prior to the Communist seizure of power, was forced into exile in 1948 and used atrocity stories to emphasize the illegality of the Red Army's (and by extension the Communists') presence in Hungary. Indeed, he even employed sexual metaphors to characterize Soviet aggression: 'Communist imperialism is an advancing process of penetration . . . by its very nature it cannot stop'.[21] In his book *The Struggle behind the Iron Curtain*, he deliberately picked out examples of rape that would horrify his audience in the West and would illustrate Hungary's status as victim of Soviet aggression:

> The barbarism of the Soviet occupying forces can best be judged by the fact that many thousands of Hungarian men were raped or forced to unnatural excesses by Russian women soldiers. The Reds established a recreation camp near Kecskemét for more than thirty thousand sick and convalescent women members of the Soviet army and the police forces. From this camp, for instance, the Russian women banded together at night and swooped down on the surrounding hamlets, kidnapping the men and sometimes holding them captive for days.

[20] For a good critique of the weakness of feminism in post-Communist Hungary, see Joanna Goven, 'Gender Politics in Hungary: Autonomy and Antifeminism', in Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller (eds.), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (London, 1993).

[21] Nagy, *Struggle behind the Iron Curtain*, p. xi.

> Often these abductions led to the peculiar situation of women and girls hiding, not themselves, but their men in the forests and in haystacks to keep them from the disease-ridden Soviet women troops.[22]

In order to emphasize the endemic nature of rape in the Red Army, he stressed the complicity of an unlikely set of perpetrators: incapacitated female soldiers.[23] He also highlighted that rape was carried out by organized bands of women soldiers and was not perpetrated solely by rogue individuals. Moreover, by suggesting that even men were at risk, he implied that all Hungarians, not just vulnerable women, were terrified victims. Stories of sexual brutality were elided into the idea of an entire nation victimized and subdued.

Post-Communist nationalist discourses have revived these ways of presenting rape, interweaving stories of sexual violence with the violation of national symbols and the destruction of the Hungarian nation. In the film *A vád* (The Prosecution, 1998), the director Sándor Sára implied that Hungary herself was 'raped' by the Communists through the linking of two narratives. The central story of the rape of a Hungarian peasant woman (the idealized conservative embodiment of the Hungarian nation), and the trial of her brother for shooting the Red Army rapist, was juxtaposed with scenes showing the events leading to the takeover of the state by the Communist party. In a similar fashion, the Hungarian Catholic Church has used narratives of rape to symbolize the destruction of a Christian nation by a barbarous, heathen force. The Catholic bishop of Győr, Vilmos Apor, 'martyred' following his unsuccessful attempt to protect Hungarian women at his palace from Soviet troops, was promoted by the Church for beatification (this was granted in 1997). In popular versions of the story of his death, Vilmos Apor, in full ceremonial dress, was shot three times on Good Friday and died two days later on Easter Sunday. In this story, both the rape of Hungarian women and the murder of a Catholic bishop mirrored and mutually reinforced the narrative of a nation and its traditions destroyed by a marauding enemy army.

[22] *Ibid.*, 63.

[23] In so doing, he was drawing upon a central theme of conservative-nationalist critiques of Communism in this period: under the Soviets gender identities had become confused and women were now capable of violent acts previously associated only with men.

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The connection between the rape of Hungary's women and the 'rape of the nation' was crucial for post-1989 nationalists' accounts of Communism. For them, Communism was a foreign force, imposed from the outside, under which ordinary Hungarians were simply victims and never complicit in its operation.[24] Any memory of support for Communism or of complex relationships between Communist state and citizen were marginalized. Shocking rape stories reinforced this version of history: Hungarian women were only ever victims of Soviet violence and any memory of fraternization between Soviet troops and Hungarian women was erased.[25] In other nationalist depictions of Hungarian history, the Communist period is left out entirely, as if it was not part of the nation's past at all.[26] In these cases, the story of rape functioned to mark the point at which the Hungarian citizen became a passive victim and the history of the Hungarian nation was put on hold.

Horrific stories of rape have also been used to divert attention away from Hungary's experience of Fascism and the Holocaust. Post-Communist nationalist histories have sought to draw attention to one specific set of victims — the Hungarian nation under Communism — whilst deliberately ignoring others — in particular Hungarian Jewish victims of the Holocaust and political opponents of Fascism. This construction was crucial to the anti-Communist rhetoric of the first conservative administration after 1990. Its leaders presented themselves as the inheritors of the anti-Communist, nationalist traditions of the conservative Horthy regime of the interwar years. In so doing, they revived the memory of Horthy's army as heroic

[24] In this interpretation, Hungarians under Nazi and Soviet occupations were seen as helpless victims, stripped of any responsibility for what was done in their country during these years. For one public manifestation of this approach in the context of a contemporary Hungarian museum, see Mark Pittaway, 'The "House of Terror" and Hungary's Politics of Memory', *Austrian Studies Newsletter*, xv, 1 (2003).

[25] Little evidence has survived detailing the extent of fraternization between Hungarians and Red Army troops. One historian has estimated that the number of prostitutes in Budapest increased twentyfold after the arrival of the Red Army. See Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, 289.

[26] See István Rév, 'Parallel Autopsies', *Representations*, xlix (1995), 32–3. He explored how symbolic similarities between the burial of the first leader of post-Communist Hungary, and the almost contemporaneous reburial of the interwar and wartime leader Admiral Horthy, established a natural continuity between 1944 and 1989, and erased the intervening years of Communism in the national imagination.

Hungarian patriots who fought the 'evil' Soviet Union, and thereby resisted the arrival of Communism in Hungary 'in advance'.[27] The facts that they had been fighting alongside Nazi Germany, that the Horthy administration had introduced the first anti-Semitic measures in Hungary, and that Jewish deportations had begun under his regime (although the extent of his responsibility is still debated) were marginalized. The story of victimized Hungarian women again played a significant part in such a narrative: the alliance with Nazi Germany was forgotten as Hungarian soldiers came to be remembered as heroes of a campaign in which they fought to protect their country and its women from the Soviets. Moreover, an emphasis on the sexual violence of the Soviet army has distracted attention from the far greater violence which preceded it under the German occupation and the indigenous Hungarian Fascist regime.

Nationalist histories have provided those conservative women who have wanted to describe their suffering at the hands of the Red Army with a language of victimhood and trauma. However, this has also meant that these women's narratives have been shaped by the language of Hungarian nationalism, and that their stories of rape contribute to the marginalization of the memory of Fascism and the Holocaust.[28] Within oral history accounts, conservative women themselves were prepared to use accounts of rape to illustrate the brutality of the Soviets whilst simultaneously playing down the violence inflicted on certain sections of the Hungarian population during the German occupation from March 1944.

Many conservative women normalized their experiences of, or downplayed the historic importance of, the German occupation

[27] For an excellent exploration of this historical mindset, see Rév, 'Parallel Autopsies', 31–4. See also István Deák, 'A Fatal Compromise? The Debate over Collaboration and Resistance in Hungary', in István Deák, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War Two and its Aftermath* (Princeton, 2000), 40–1.

[28] This does not mean that all these respondents had Fascist sympathies, but rather that for many interviewees, particularly conservative ones, Fascism was not perceived to be as great an evil as Communism and was not presented as a defining moment in their life stories or in their nation's history. The absence of a rejection of Fascism within post-Communist Eastern European societies has been explored in István Rév, 'Counterrevolution', in Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu (eds.), *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and their Aftermath* (Budapest, 2000).

of Hungary and the Fascist regime which followed it. This was despite the fact that after May 1944 the Nazis' political enemies were persecuted and the Jewish population was deported in large numbers to concentration camps outside the country:[29]

James: So, what was your personal experience of German occupation?

Irén: Nothing special. I have to say nothing special, because we were not, how should I say, we had nothing to fear. My father was in a good position, he was a director.

Mária too claimed not to have been affected by the German occupation:

Mária: We had a very beautiful life . . . that was until [December] 1944 . . . then the siege came. I still haven't mentioned the war because it did not affect us much . . . where we lived in Buda on Sváb Hill, we say that the war did not touch us there. But then during the siege . . . when the Russians came, then I can say that our lives were turned through 180 degrees.

What matters here is not whether her life was *actually* beautiful or not (it may well have been) but rather the fact that after revelations about the horrors of the German occupation and of the indigenous Fascist regime, she still did not feel the need to alter her testimony to address her former ignorance of what was happening to others in her society. The absence of right-wing violence and the Holocaust in her testimony suggested that she wanted to present Communism, not Fascism, as the greatest evil of her lifetime.

The sexual brutality of the Red Army was crucial for this narrative. It focused on the evils of the Soviets, and by extension the Communists, whilst playing down the horrors of the Hungarian Fascist experience. This point was often made through an explicit contrast between the kindness of German soldiers and the brutality of the Red Army. One respondent used the image of rape in 1945 to criticize her Jewish friend's 'mistaken' view of the Germans as enemies and the Soviets as liberators:

James: And what was your impression of the German soldiers? Do you remember?

Ildikó: I could go to the country alone and whenever I met a German soldier they were just helpful . . . the German Wehrmacht, the army were cultured people. And the army, when they came, were just marvellous . . . My friend, she's very nice, but she's not conservative and she thinks differently about certain things. The Russians, she thinks

[29] It is estimated that almost half a million Hungarian Jews were killed.

> they saved her life, because she was a Jewish girl, but still these Jewish people were taken by the Communists and sent to prison again. So somebody who came back from Auschwitz was sent to the Gulag. We were very much frightened. My father fought against Bolshevism and was in the army. So of course, until the last drop of our blood, we were against the Russians . . . I had to leave home because some of them were very interested in me. I was thirteen years old or so and my mother tried to hide me and I went with other families.

In a Hungarian context, the telling of stories about rape was thus deeply politicized. Stories of women's suffering should not be seen only as the product of the end of censorship or as a society 'coming to terms' with a traumatic past: rather they have been a product of nationalist versions of Hungarian history that have deflected attention away from the crimes of Fascism by focusing on those of the Red Army and the Communist regime. It was only women from conservative backgrounds who remembered rape in this way. Nationalism had given them a language with which they could articulate their suffering at the hands of the Red Army and which did not conflict with their own conservative interpretations of history.[30]

II

RAPE STORIES: MARGINALIZATION AND DENIAL

In oral history testimony, other groups who experienced the Soviet occupation downplayed the experience of rape or denied that it had occurred at all. For them, horrific rape stories were associated with right-wing views. This had been true even before the arrival of the Red Army in Hungary, when stories about the cruelties inflicted on local populations by the Soviets were seen by many as the product of German and Hungarian wartime propaganda. The Nazis had presented Soviet troops as racially inferior, from a lower level of civilization and thus capable of acts of extreme brutality.[31] Recruitment posters for the Hungarian army had suggested that if the Red Army reached Hungary, men would be deported to Siberia and women and children would be left to suffer under a brutal occupying army (see Plate). One

[30] For another exploration of the way in which nationalists have used stories of women's suffering, see Pető, 'Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna', 147–8.

[31] Similar images of the Red Army as animalistic and subhuman were produced in Nazi Germany: see Grossman, 'Question of Silence', 39.

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well-known poster in Budapest featured a Red Army soldier ripping a crucifix from a woman's neck.[32] Many oral history respondents remembered radio broadcasts which alluded to the terrible way in which the Red Army were expected to treat women and children.

The Nazis' use of images of Soviet atrocities meant that the issue of rape was politicized even before the arrival of the Red Army. Atrocity stories were immediately distrusted by left-wingers, liberals and Jews, who saw them as an invention of Fascist propaganda. According to Alexandra Orme, a Polish aristocrat who was in Hungary in 1944–5,

> The papers never used to call the Russians anything but the 'Red Hangmen' or the 'Perverts' and the local wireless station, which was manned by Germans, never tired of broadcasting accounts of the horrible crimes committed by the Russians . . . We did not believe a word of it. Among ourselves, we would admit the possibility of there being a few isolated cases of Russian soldiers getting drunk and raping a few women who happened to come their way, but on the whole we had the best possible opinion of the Russian army.[33]

By contrast, conservatives who supported the Hungarian–German war effort and saw the Soviet forces as their enemy were easily convinced that many accounts of Red Army atrocities were accurate:

> *James: Do you remember when you heard that the Russians were getting close to Budapest?*
>
> Magda: Yes, yes, up till then the radio worked and it was always possible to hear things about it . . . I felt a great amount of fear, as they depicted them as such wild people . . . they spoke about how cruel they were: they raped the women, they looted, they shot people down. One believed it for a long time and now looking back —it was just propaganda, but there was an awful lot of truth in it as well.

The fact that atrocity stories existed as a form of propaganda prior to the arrival of the Red Army meant that these politicized frames influenced Hungarian attitudes towards the Soviets when they did arrive, and Hungarians' subsequent explanations of the Red Army's actions. Conservatives had their suspicions about the army's brutality adequately confirmed by the troops' behaviour after their arrival. Moreover, in their explanations of

[32] Polcz, *Wartime Memoir*, ed. Tezla, 93.

[33] Alexandra Orme, *From Christmas to Easter: A Guide to a Russian Occupation*, trans. M. A. Michael and L. Meyer (London, 1949), 4. This was a memoir, published four years after the war, based on a diary kept in 1944–5.

'Do you want to end up in Siberia too? Never! Then fight and work for victory!' Note the bodies of women and children by the side of the railway tracks.
Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest.
By permission of the Hungarian National Museum Poster Collection.

Soviet violence, they drew on Nazi propaganda which had presented the Second World War as a racial struggle against an inferior 'Asiatic' civilization wanting to impose its barbarous political ideology on Europe.[34] Evidence for this racial interpretation of the war was amply provided by the high number of badly behaved Central Asian troops amongst the Soviet occupying forces in Budapest. Many conservatives still drew on the link between the racial inferiority of Asiatic-looking troops, their lack of civilization and their corresponding lack of sexual restraint with Hungarian women:

> Győző: It [rape] was an everyday thing for the Russians. If they arrived and they could do it, then they did it . . . the remainder [in the army] were Asiatic, who came from a different level of civilization . . . in them there was no kind of inhibition.

Yet for others, the experience of occupation did not lead them to present the Red Army as uncivilized barbarian rapists. They still saw images of sexual violence as the stuff of Nazi propaganda: Alexandra Orme, as late as 1949, found it easy to explain away incidences of brutality and argued for the essential goodness of the Soviet soldier:

> I never found one really bad person amongst them. I was to hear much of how they stole, looted and raped. They do that when they are drunk, or when their commander is an evil person himself and exercises a bad influence on them . . . The Russian soldier ought by right to have been a dreadful and a dangerous person, for he has neither discipline nor even religion to restrain him, and from childhood has been taught that Europe is inhabited by bloodsuckers whom he ought to destroy. But get to know him properly . . . you will see that nowhere are there so many good people as in Russia.[35]

After the war, the capacity of individuals to deny that rapes had occurred continued to be closely linked with their political beliefs. Sándor, for instance, had come from a Jewish left-wing family and joined both the Communist party and an auxiliary unit of the Red Army immediately after the war. In such a position, nobody had dared to tell him about atrocities. Moreover, his support for the Communists led him to dismiss rumours of rape:

[34] See, for example, Wolfram Wette, 'Német propaganda és a csatlósországok: Magyarország, Románia és Bulgária (1941–43)' [German War Propaganda in the Satellite States: Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria (1941–43)], *Történelmi szemle*, xxii (1979), 478–9. See also Balázs Sipos, 'Szovjetbarát és szovjetellenes nyilas propaganda, 1939–1941' [Pro-Soviet and Anti-Soviet Fascist Propaganda, 1939–1941], *Múltunk*, xli (1996).

[35] Orme, *From Christmas to Easter*, 85.

James: I'm also interested in the rumours that were going round about the Soviet army at that time.

Sándor: Well, I mean, I don't know whether I did hear about them raping people and so on. We *now* know they did. This wouldn't have necessarily reached a young man . . . wearing a red armband. And by March or April [1945] when school started we already had guns . . . so nobody would have told me what they thought about it. And for us I think they remained the 'Liberators' certainly for some time.

James: . . . did you hear about rapes at the time, or was it only later?

Sándor: Don't remember. I would have blotted it out, probably . . . I could very well imagine that, if anything arrived in our family circle one would have said that 'this is Nazi nonsense' . . . So we wouldn't have believed it . . . that's the same as the interwar lefties who didn't want to believe the purges of 1937 — that they were just rumours put around by the enemy.

His belief that the new Soviet man was not sexually aggressive was put to the test when, as a young Communist party member, he supervised a regiment of visiting Soviet trade apprentices:

Sándor: I think at that time we were still convinced that they [the Soviets] were new men . . . [they were the] Battalion of Trade Apprentices, who were of course young proletarians from Moscow for whom this was the beautiful West . . . and at night [they] were regularly jumping out of their windows and going to drink somewhere or pick up some whores or whatever else, which we were very embarrassed by. Very embarrassed by them. Didn't denounce them, but we knew about it, because they asked for our help.

He continued to deny that atrocities had occurred as long as he considered the arrival of the Red Army as a liberation, preserved his faith in the post-war political transformation which that liberation had allowed and maintained his belief in the potential of the Communist state (even if he had been disillusioned at certain points). He started to believe stories of rape only during his army service in 1954 when faced with the suicides of old men forced to enter collective farms:

James: So, when did you start to believe [in the occurrence of rape]?

Sándor: . . . As I say, it was during my army service when it became clear what was going on in the country . . . I think we once or twice tried to keep the old men from hanging themselves. But then I thought that that's not really what we want to do, and kind of decided to 'tend my gardens'.

Stories that marginalized the importance of Red Army atrocities, or downplayed the trauma caused by the experience, have not received public attention in post-Communist Hungary.

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However, they frequently occurred in private oral history testimony. These stories have been shaped by the continued political debates over the meaning of the Second World War and its aftermath in post-Communist culture. As we saw above, nationalist voices in contemporary Hungary have moulded women's stories into narratives of brutality and victimization in order to illustrate the rightness of the Hungarian army's struggle alongside Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, and the victimization of the Hungarian nation under the Communist regime which followed. Thus for Jewish and left-wing respondents, horror stories of trauma and victimhood have been associated with right-wing versions of history that marginalize the memory of Fascism and the Holocaust.

Some groups in post-Communist Hungarian society still presented the arrival of the Red Army as a liberation. For them, the Red Army had defeated Fascism, and had brought political persecution and the deportation and extermination of Hungary's Jewish population to an end. Whatever the later consequences of the Soviet presence, for such respondents the Red Army's role as their liberators could not be eroded. This position was put most forcefully by Jewish respondents, one of whom recounted an idealized 'saviour' image she still held of the 'liberating army':

> Luca: And then on the morning of the liberation (laughs), there was, I mean, I think this is not true, but my memory is that this Russian soldier in a white fur coat, with a gleaming sword, I mean, that's how I remember it, came in, and there were people kissing his hand, I don't know how much truth there is in it!

Another Jewish man, Jenő, also sought to retain his view of the Red Army as liberators despite the fact that the term *felszabadulás* (liberation) had been tarred by the Communist regime's use of it to legitimize their own power:

> *James: Is it difficult to speak about a 'felszabadulás' today?*
>
> Jenő: Today it is much more difficult, because society violently denies that it was a liberation and attacks the idea. I naturally approve of the fact that it is no longer obligatory to call 1945 a liberation, as it was under the Communist regime. But saying liberation shouldn't be forbidden, or made almost impossible to say. Here it is a real problem, because the Jews and the left-wingers felt it was a *felszabadulás* as the arrival of the Russians and their driving out of the Germans made life much easier, because danger to one's life or the danger of losing one's freedom ended. [But] a large part of the population didn't experience it like that.

Faced with the contemporary conservative portrayal of the Red Army as brutal occupiers, these respondents, especially Jewish ones, created a counter-narrative: they downplayed rape or provided different accounts of the sexual contact between Soviet soldiers and Hungarian women. In so doing, they used rape stories as a different form of 'truth-telling': to highlight their experience of 1945 as a liberation. Miklós directly attacked the dominant conservative representation:

James: And so, did you see any of the behaviour of Russian soldiers?

Miklós: Yes. Now, don't expect me to say the usual thing that every Russian was a rapist. No! Many of the girls, even the Jewish girls, were happy to be raped, and they came up [to you] afterwards and said, 'but he was so experienced!' (laughs).

Both men and women sought to reinstate the Red Army as liberators by challenging rape stories, but they did so in different ways. For Jewish or left-wing men, stories of mass rape were often replaced by narratives of consensual sex between Hungarian women and Soviet soldiers. Unlike conservatives, who never mentioned the question of fraternization, these men thought that women might express their gratitude by offering themselves sexually to their liberators:

Zoltán: When we lived in that air raid shelter, they wanted to rape my wife's elder sister, but there was another young lady whom they took, and she said, 'please, I owe my life to you, I will volunteer'. And instead of Anikó this woman allowed two or three Russian soldiers to go through her [*sic*].

These men did not present such actions as collaboration: the Red Army were not considered the enemy, and hence women could sleep with them and remain honourable:

James: Did you know anybody who was raped by the Russians?

Mátyás: . . . At our place we were lucky, because in the house where we were there were two women, whom they didn't have to rape, because they gave their services to the Russians with a lot of pleasure, and therefore gave us a small kind of defence in this micro-environment, but this was a particularly fortunate set-up. Two honourable (*becsületes*) Hungarian women, who happily slept with the Russians.

Left-wing and Jewish women did not substitute stories of forced violation for narratives of consensual sex, as their male counterparts did. They were more prepared to admit to the occurrence of rape but nevertheless wanted to show that the experience was very different from the horrific encounters

recalled by conservative women. Many found excuses for the Red Army's behaviour, believed that rape should be put in the context of greater atrocities committed during the war, or argued that it was not a traumatic experience. Luca was typical in retaining her sympathy for the Red Army despite the near-rape of a family member:

> Luca: . . . I don't look at this and say, 'Oh, terrible Russian troops!' I mean, they were soldiers, they were away from home, they were fighting, I mean, what do you expect? They nearly raped my sister, but again, it was my father who saved her, but again, I look at it, these were people away for years from their girlfriends, what do you expect?

Even left-wing or Jewish women who were raped did not shape the story of their own violation into one of trauma and victimization. Katalin was assaulted by two Red Army soldiers. She came from a wealthy, conservative family but had turned to socialism as a young woman and had welcomed the Red Army as liberators. She had hoped that the collapse of Horthy's Hungary would usher in a more equitable meritocratic society, but was quickly disappointed by her experience of the Communist state, especially as her class background confined her to menial jobs. She was equally disillusioned by post-Communist Hungary, which she saw as an iniquitous society. She therefore sought to provide an image of the Red Army that spoke of her experience of liberation in 1945 and took issue with the stories of mass rapes which she considered to have been invented in post-Communist Hungary.

Essentially, she rejected the idea that women had seen themselves as victims of the Red Army in 1945. She was interviewed with another woman (Éva) who related how her mother had dressed her like a boy in order to prevent her being raped. Katalin immediately challenged the idea that girls needed to disguise themselves:

> *James: Can you remember what you thought about the Russians coming?*
>
> Éva: Yes, I was afraid, because from the radio and from broadcasts you knew that they were bad and they took children and they raped women and girls . . .
>
> Katalin: Propaganda . . . German propaganda only . . .
>
> Éva: But it goes on when a war comes . . . So my mother made me look like a boy and gave me a boy's name . . . My hair was cut off to make me into a boy.

Katalin: What was your age?

Éva: Six or something like that.

Katalin: You weren't in danger whether you were a girl or a boy . . . Why did she think you were safer as a boy than as a girl of six years? . . . Sixteen years old I would understand, but six years?

James: So, did you try to change your appearance when the Russians came?

Katalin: I never . . . I was not afraid . . . I never had the feeling of being in danger.

She then gave an account of her own rape:

Katalin: When I had to get up, because nature was calling, they [the Red Army soldiers] noticed that I was not a child, and then the situation began to get tricky because they had already begun to court the girls. When later I had to go out, one or two of them escorted me to the neighbour's, and they used the opportunity —when I was already married —but I did not die from it. I was lucky because they were provided with condoms from the Tétényi Rubber Factory . . . So when things happened I was astonished but I said, 'so, all right, we survived, that's no problem' . . . you must understand that a great many came from a very bad environment in Russia and were very poor.

Her account was moulded by her own politics: her sympathy for the Red Army meant that she did not use the story of her own rape to demonize them. First, she presented the soldiers as having 'courted the girls' rather than having violated them. Second, she downplayed its importance ('I did not die from it') and brought out admirable aspects of Red Army behaviour: the soldiers brought condoms from the local rubber factory. Third, she did not use the language of victimization or trauma so common in nationalist accounts. She presented her rape in the least psychologically damaging way possible: she did not stress the brutalization or violation that was central to other narratives. Rather, the worst aspect was that she was 'already married'. The idea of psychological trauma was also rejected: the rape was neither a defining moment in her life nor did it have a damaging effect on her ('we survived, that's no problem'). Lastly, she sympathized with the culpable soldiers and found reasons to explain their behaviour. The idea that some soldiers were backward and primitive was central to this construction: she turned the Red Army soldiers into the true victims in the encounter and placed herself above 'poor' Russians. Her loss of honour

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was erased by the belief that she was superior to those who raped her.[36]

The most striking aspect of her testimony was that she did not present herself as a victim. Like other Jewish and left-wing women who were raped, Katalin avoided a language of trauma, as this might have implied that she was a conservative who wished to demonize the Soviets and marginalize the importance of Fascism and the Holocaust. The telling of the story of her own rape became subsumed in the continuing, politicized debates over the meaning of Red Army atrocities in contemporary Hungary.

III

TELLING REASONABLE, BALANCED STORIES ABOUT RAPE?

Not all respondents used atrocity stories so explicitly to promote a particular representation of the past. Some provided more balanced accounts that deliberately avoided the more extreme ways of talking about rape. Their nuanced narratives contained complex representations of their expectations of the Red Army in 1944 and frequently ambiguous, subtle observations of the army's behaviour when it arrived. As such, they appeared to be much more reasonable, reliable witnesses of 1945:

James: Were there rumours about the Red Army?

Ödön: Yes, but we always thought that whatever bad was said about them was put around deliberately by the authorities so I don't think that my family or people in the cellar, apart from the Fascist comrade, believed any of these rumours and I think it came as quite a shock to us that the first thing they did was to rob us . . . there were two younger women, whom they simply selected from the crowd and herded towards the door and everybody knew what this meant, but after a few minutes they reappeared because apparently they were crying and begging them and I suppose even a soldier didn't want that sort of fuss.

Ödön's narrative seemed apolitical and balanced. It presented a detailed, realistic account which unfolded gradually, allowed for contradictions, and avoided extreme representations of the Red Army. In fact, each observation appeared to undercut the political

[36] This point was also made about German women's representations of rape in Grossman, 'Question of Silence', 49.

associations of the previous one: Soviet crimes had been seen as Fascist propaganda but had turned out to be true; Soviet soldiers had appeared to them as brutal villains but were then attributed some humanity for not raping in the face of women's protests.

Due to its seeming balance and lack of an overt political standpoint, this type of narrative initially appears more appealing as an eye-witness report. However, this kind of testimony was produced only by liberal respondents, and was equally shaped by their attitudes towards Fascism and Communism. For many who had hoped for a liberal, democratic and progressive Hungary after the war, the historical meaning of the events of 1945 has changed over time. The historian and political essayist István Bibó, writing in 1945, argued that Hungarians would only come to use the word 'liberation' in the long term if the presence of the Red Army resulted in the establishment of an accepted democratic system:

> One thing should be clear: it is *crucial* for Hungary that the fall of the old system remains or comes to be considered a *liberation*, and for the oppressive elements of the sick Hungarian social structure which disappeared with the arrival of the Red Army — the hunting aristocrats, the caste-bound officers and bureaucrats, the gendarmes, and the German-oriented 'educators of nation' — to be prevented from returning. We must therefore make sure that, even if our memory forever connects liberation with the varied physical and human miseries of a lost war, the same liberation shall be made a pure and historical reality for our grandchildren because it ushered in *a long series* of developments with positive consequences. It is crucial for Hungary that the liberating achievement of the Soviet army not be forgotten but preserve its significance for Hungary's democratic development.[37]

For liberal Hungarians, however, the opportunity for positive political change ended in 1948 with the Communist takeover. At this point, many respondents revised their view of the Red Army as liberators:

> *James: Did you meet anybody who thought that 1945 was a liberation?*
>
> Csaba: Loads of people used to say it . . . they used to call these events a liberation . . . But in France there is an idea of liberation that remained after the war (*háború utáni felszabadulás*). Here there isn't, because they [the Communists] changed the street names to Liberation Boulevard and Liberation Square. They don't say this word 'liberation' now, because now it is connected with the Russians.

[37] István Bibó, 'The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy', in his *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination: Selected Writings*, ed. Károly Nagy, trans. András Boros-Kazai (New York, 1991), 91. Original emphasis.

Liberal testimony about rape reflected these complex responses to Hungary's history. These respondents had no need to downplay the occurrence of rape in order to maintain an image of the Red Army as liberators, as Jews and left-wingers did, and so could acknowledge that atrocities did take place. However, they did not like the excessive use of brutal, uncontextualized images of rape that they felt had marginalized the positive role the Red Army had played in ending Fascism in Hungary. Their choice of a balanced narrative was produced by a desire to steer a middle course between two politicized extremes found in their society.

Such narratives about rape were also shaped by liberal critiques of Fascism and Communism. Left-wingers and Jews had marginalized the importance of rape in order to emphasize the historical importance of Fascism and the Holocaust in Hungary, whereas conservatives had fashioned horrific stories of violation in order to demonize Communism. Liberals' historical constructions posited both Fascism and Communism as defining evils that had to be firmly rejected. However, many believed that Horthy's Hungary and the Fascist state which followed it were worse, both because the interwar conservative administration had stifled social and economic progress, and because it had led to a genocidal regime after May 1944. Hence, what initially appeared to be reasoned contextualization was often in fact an attempt to create a hierarchy of brutality by stigmatizing one political system as worse than another by attributing greater violence to it. Liberals in Hungary used stories of rape to imply that both Fascism and Communism were evil ideologies, but to suggest that Fascism was worse:

> *James: So, you said you remember people talking about the rapes that took place. What did people say?*
>
> Vera: Well, it was common knowledge that they came into a dwelling where there were women, and raped them, several of them in succession . . . You must understand that the Germans did much worse than that. I saw Germans throwing babies at the wall, you know, their brains popping out, and I didn't see the Russians doing that.

Moreover, liberal accounts could not avoid the politicized language associated with narratives about Red Army atrocities. Despite attempting to appear neutral, the absence of a language

with which to do this undercut their efforts as they spoke. According to Ágota:

> Ágota: My father said that we wouldn't go anywhere, we would stay in the shelter of our own house, nobody would harm us. However, they came into the shelter in the priory, and the Russian soldiers raped a lot of the women there . . . then the Russians set up a large kitchen and we went there to peel potatoes[38] and they gave us something to eat as well . . . but I'm not a Stalinist, nor a Rákosi supporter.

In this narrative, she gave a series of descriptions of Red Army behaviour followed by a statement with entirely the opposite connotations, in an attempt to prove that she was not politicized. Ágota first described how her family had faith in the Red Army and did not expect them to harm women. Secondly, she then related the atrocities that, to her family's surprise, were committed. Thirdly, not wishing to provide an entirely negative image of the Red Army, she emphasized that the troops gave food to her family. Fourthly, she realized that by describing Soviet soldiers in a positive light she might have appeared to be a hard-line Stalinist. She therefore needed to distance herself from the Stalinist Rákosi regime.

Hungarian liberals sought to present themselves as neutral observers of atrocity within an excessively politicized society. Yet their narratives of rape were equally moulded by their attitudes towards Fascism and Communism. Moreover, they were often unable to find a politically neutral language: all statements about the Red Army were imbued with potentially hazardous political connotations. Hence, as Ágota's account demonstrated, an impression of neutrality was sought by juxtaposing statements from either side of the political debate, in the hope that an imagined audience would find the narrative balanced or objective. Thus even in the liberal attempt to find a neutral way of describing rape, the politicized nature of all representations of Red Army atrocities was made apparent.

[38] The phrase 'to peel potatoes' (*krumplit pucolni*) is ambiguous in this narrative. Other respondents, mainly of a conservative persuasion, used the term ironically to mean that a woman was being taken away to a Russian camp to be raped rather than to peel potatoes. I only discovered this meaning during a later interview, hence I was unable to ask her to clarify exactly what she had meant.

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IV

CONCLUSION

The rise of interest in rape as an object of historical study has been in part due to the political power of presenting raped women as victims. The first scholars who introduced rape into the historical mainstream were feminists who argued that the victimization of women should be understood as a common way of subjugating a nation within war. This interpretation has also become powerful within Western historiography, and Western culture more generally, as it has appealed to widely held ideas about aggressive male sexuality, the oppression of women, and unequal gender relations. A few (mainly feminist) scholars have criticized aspects of this approach: one has explored how raped women construct themselves as victims only in particular historical circumstances;[39] some have demonstrated how accounts of sexual violence can be used to support reactionary interpretations of the past;[40] whilst others have explored how victim narratives are seldom cases of 'truth-telling': certain aspects of women's suffering become emphasized, and others are ignored, in order to support contemporary political agendas.[41]

[39] For an account of how a woman who was sexually violated in the 1970s did not consider herself a victim at the time, but later came to revise the meaning of her experience, see Mary Beard, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 24 Aug. 2000.

[40] Atina Grossman, for instance, has explored the political ramifications of post-Cold War feminist 'uncovering' of the 'hidden' suffering of German women at the hands of the Soviets in 1945. She argues that this research has inadvertently reinforced right-wing interpretations of the Nazi period which present an undifferentiated picture of all Germans suffering equally as a result of 'Hitler's war', which do not recognize the need to attach a greater weight to the persecution of Jews (over the suffering of ordinary Germans), and which contribute to a political culture which underemphasizes the specificity of the Holocaust. See Grossman, 'Question of Silence'.

[41] For an exploration of the problematic ways in which victimization narratives from the Bosnian War have been used, see *Women, Violence and War: Wartime Victimization of Refugees in the Balkans*, ed. Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović, trans. Borislav Radović (Budapest, 2000), 45–6. She argues that western feminists concentrated on the rape of Croatian and Bosnian women as they could unambiguously be presented as victims of a brutal aggressor. Serbian women who were raped were ignored because their status as symbols of both aggression and victimization made them ambiguous figures.

These victimization narratives have also become widespread because occupied nations have been able to employ stories about their experience of rape to political effect: to construct the idea of themselves as wronged victims of wars,[42] or to use the image of the brutal, animalistic rapist to assert their own cultural superiority over those who raped them.[43] Other types of stories, such as the downplaying or denial of rape, have always been viewed as the preserve of the nation that committed the rapes, who have a vested interest in suppressing the memory of their complicity in atrocities.[44] The Hungarian case was striking because part of the civilian population which experienced these atrocities *also* wished to downplay or deny them. The fact that women who were raped, and those who were closely affected by rape, should reject the label of victim, suggests that we need to be critical of the political deployment of all rape stories, including the seemingly 'natural' presentation of rape as traumatizing. Both denials and victimization narratives can be used for political purposes.

Narratives that emphasize the victimization of women in war do not simply give a voice to a previously marginalized group; they are also used to stigmatize the group that did the raping. For nationalist historical narratives, this may mean the demonization of enemy occupiers. For some feminist writers, this may be the stigmatization of a culture which promotes aggressive male sexuality. Within Hungary, this vilification began even before the atrocities occurred. It was prefigured in Nazi propaganda about the cruelty of the advancing Soviet army. This propaganda then supplied a model for the telling of atrocity stories when the Red Army actually arrived, and its soldiers'

[42] See *Women, Violence and War*, ed. Nikolić-Ristanović, esp. 45–6, 138.

[43] See Grossman, 'Question of Silence', esp. 49, 51, on the way in which narratives which stressed suffering, victimhood and cultural superiority over the Russians developed in West Germany after the war.

[44] In 1945 itself, some members of the Red Army convinced themselves that those who were raped were not brutalized by it. One Soviet major reported that 'our fellows were so sex-starved that they often raped old women of sixty, seventy or even eighty — much to these grandmothers' surprise, if not downright delight'. See Beevor, *Berlin*, 31. For an analysis of rape denial by Serbians, see Stevan M. Weine, *When History Is a Nightmare: Lives and Memories of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (New Brunswick, 1999), 136. For an analysis of Japanese denials of the 'rape of Nanking', see Chang, *Rape of Nanking*, 201–4.

behaviour provided ample evidence of their capacity for sexual brutality. After the war, the demonization of the Red Army as rapists then became a way of describing the roots of the subjugation of Hungary by the Soviet-backed Communist party. Even in the post-Communist period, this interpretation has remained: stories of mass rape have legitimized a historical reading of Communism which characterizes ordinary Hungarians as victims of a foreign ideology violently imposed from outside the country, and thus erases the need to examine the more complex relationships that were formed between the Communist state and Hungarian society.

The downplaying or denial of rape has an equally politicized history: it betrays an allegiance to the groups that are accused of committing sexual atrocities. Many who were grateful to the Red Army for saving them from the effects of Fascism, such as Jews, left-wingers and some liberals, did not want their liberators marked out as rapists and their nation's women regarded solely as victims. In the most extreme cases, Communist party supporters denied that their 'glorious liberators' had raped at all. The downplaying of rape still occurred in post-Communist Hungary, where it continued to serve a direct political purpose. Some groups, especially Jews, still felt gratitude towards the Red Army. They rejected the dominant modern narratives of brutal soldiers and mass rapes as a conservative–nationalist historical myth that has served to marginalize the importance of Fascism and the Holocaust for Hungary.

There has been no neutral way to talk about the atrocities committed by the Red Army in Hungary. As Bibó commented in 1945, the Hungarian population, 'confused by having been exposed to distorted world views for decades . . . envisioned the Russian army exclusively in terms of such stereotypes, and instead of expecting living, flesh-and-blood individuals, they saw the arrival of devils or angels embodying an ideology'.[45] Even today, Red Army soldiers are imagined as angels or devils, and stories of mass atrocities, rape denial, consensual sex or contextualized brutality reflect the political debates and conflicts within Hungarian society. Thus the contradictory stories that continue to be told about rape are a direct consequence of

[45] Bibó, 'Crisis of Hungarian Democracy', 91.

Hungary's 'unmastered past' — and there is still very little sign that consensual accounts of the Red Army's behaviour and of the country's experience of the war, Fascism and Communism can be acceptably constructed within present-day Hungarian society.

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